The Illusion of Endless Desire: A Philosophical Essay on The King of Elfland's Daughter

by Daniel Shilansky

The Quarrel Between Two Worlds

A quarrel runs through the whole of modern European thought, older than most people suppose. At its root, this is not a quarrel between religion and science, though it has often been dressed in those clothes. It is a quarrel about what counts as real. On one side stand those who hold that reality is, in principle, exhaustible by reason — that the world, however vast and complex, is finally the kind of thing that can be measured, classified, and explained. On the other side stand those who insist that something essential to human experience perpetually escapes such accounting — that a remainder, a residue, exists which no system of concepts can contain without falsifying it. Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, published in 1924, is a formal intervention in this quarrel. To read it as mere fantasy — as pleasant escapism dressed in archaic prose — is to miss what it is actually doing. It is a philosophical argument conducted in the mode of narrative, and to understand its argument one must first understand the debate into which it enters.

That debate, by the early decades of the twentieth century, had acquired a particular urgency and a particular shape. The dominant intellectual tendency of the nineteenth century had been, broadly speaking, positivist in spirit — meaning that it placed its confidence in the methods of natural science as the supreme, and ultimately the only reliable, path to knowledge. Auguste Comte, the French philosopher who coined the term *positivism* in the 1830s, had proposed that human thought passes through three stages: the theological, in which events are explained by the will of gods; the metaphysical, in which they are explained by abstract forces and essences; and the positive, in which they are explained by observed regularities and verifiable laws. For Comte and his many heirs, this was not merely a description of intellectual history but a prescription for the future. Myth, enchantment, and the supernatural were not simply false; they were immature — the residue of an earlier stage of mind that a properly educated civilization would outgrow.

By the time Dunsany was writing, this positivist confidence had become the ambient atmosphere of educated culture, even among those who had never read Comte. The prestige of physics, chemistry, and biology was enormous. The successes of Darwin's theory of natural selection, of Maxwell's equations for electromagnetism, of the germ theory of disease — these had created a widespread sense that the natural world was yielding its secrets to patient, systematic inquiry. The supernatural, in this climate, was not merely doubted; it was, for many, simply embarrassing. To invoke fairies, enchantments, or elfin kingdoms was to confess a failure of intellectual nerve.

The Romantic Resistance and Its Difficulties

Yet the positivist settlement had never gone uncontested. From the very moment of its ascendancy, a counter-movement had insisted that something irreplaceable was being lost. The Romantic poets and philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schelling, Novalis — had argued that the analytical, dissecting intellect, however powerful within its proper domain, was constitutionally incapable of grasping certain truths. Wordsworth famously complained that we murder to dissect: that the very act of breaking a living whole into its component parts destroys the thing we wished to understand. Coleridge distinguished between the *fancy*, which merely rearranges the materials of experience, and the *imagination*, which participates in the creative power that underlies nature itself. These were not merely aesthetic preferences; they were epistemological claims — claims about what kinds of knowing are possible and what kinds of reality exist to be known.

The difficulty was that the Romantic tradition, for all its richness, had never quite succeeded in making its case on terms that the positivist could not dismiss. When Wordsworth spoke of a presence that disturbs him with the joy of elevated thoughts, or when Novalis described the fairy tale as the canon of poetry, the positivist could always reply: these are feelings, not facts; they are reports of subjective states, not discoveries about the world. The Romantic appeal to imagination and enchantment seemed, to its critics, to be precisely the kind of thinking that the positive stage of history was designed to supersede. It was beautiful, perhaps, but it was not knowledge.

This impasse — between a positivism that could explain everything except why human beings persistently felt that something essential had been left out, and a Romanticism that could name what was missing but could not defend its claims against the charge of mere sentiment — defined the intellectual situation into which Dunsany was born and in which he wrote. By the 1880s and 1890s, the tension had become acute. Matthew Arnold, writing in the 1860s and 1870s, had proposed that poetry might take over the consoling and orienting functions that religion had once performed, now that religious belief was no longer intellectually credible for educated people. This was a generous but melancholy proposal: it conceded the positivist's point that the supernatural was not real, while insisting that the human need for something beyond the measurable was nonetheless genuine and must be met somehow.

William Morris, whose influence on Dunsany's generation was considerable, took a different path. Morris turned to medieval romance and Norse mythology not as consolation for a disenchanted world but as a form of protest against it. His prose romances of the 1880s and 1890s — *The House of the Wolfings*, *The Roots of the Mountains*, *The Well at the World's End* — created imaginary worlds governed by heroic and mythological values, worlds in which the numinous (a word meaning the sense of a sacred, awe-inspiring presence) was not a relic of superstition but the very texture of reality. Morris was not arguing that fairies literally exist; he was arguing that the mode of perception which fairy tales cultivate — attentiveness to wonder, to the sacred character of

particular places and moments, to the claims of the past upon the present — is not a childish error but a genuine and necessary form of human understanding.

Enchantment as Philosophical Problem: Weber's Diagnosis and Its Limits

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the question of enchantment — of whether the world is, or can be experienced as, genuinely mysterious and sacred, or whether such experience is simply a projection of human wishes onto a neutral material universe — had become one of the central questions of European culture. Poets and novelists were not alone in pressing it. The sociologist Max Weber, writing in Germany in the years before the First World War, gave the problem one of its most memorable formulations. Weber spoke of the *Entzauberung der Welt* — the disenchantment of the world — as the defining characteristic of modern life. By this he meant that the spread of rational, scientific, and bureaucratic ways of thinking had progressively stripped the world of its magical and sacred qualities. Where once a forest might be the dwelling of spirits, a spring the home of a goddess, a particular hour of the day charged with divine significance, the modern mind sees only trees, water, and clock-time. Weber did not celebrate this development; he regarded it with a kind of stoic melancholy. But he believed it was irreversible.

Dunsany's work must be understood against this background. *The King of Elfland's Daughter* is, among other things, a sustained meditation on exactly the problem Weber named. Its central narrative — a mortal man who seeks and wins an elfin bride, only to find that the two worlds cannot be reconciled — is a formal enactment of the tension between the enchanted and the disenchanted. But Dunsany is doing something more precise than simply lamenting the loss of wonder. He is examining the structure of the desire for enchantment itself: what it is that human beings want when they want magic, why the possession of it proves so difficult to sustain, and what the consequences are — for individuals, for communities, for the very fabric of the world — when the boundary between the ordinary and the marvellous is crossed.

Dunsany parts company here with the simpler forms of Romantic nostalgia. He does not merely assert that the enchanted world is better than the disenchanted one and invite the reader to take refuge in it. He dramatises the cost of enchantment, the instability of the boundary, and the genuine losses that attend any attempt to bring the two realms into contact. The Parliament of Erl, which opens the novel by demanding that their lord seek a magic bride for his son, does not know what it is asking for. The desire for wonder, Dunsany suggests, is real and not to be dismissed; but it is also dangerous, and its dangers are not accidental. They arise from the very nature of what is being desired.

The Desire That Cannot Be Satisfied and the World That Cannot Be Entered

The philosophical conflict at the centre of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* can be stated with some precision once we have cleared away the easier formulations. At its root, this is not a conflict between reason and imagination, nor between science and poetry, though it touches both of these. Rather, it is a conflict between two accounts of what human beings are doing when they desire something that exceeds the conditions of their ordinary existence — when they reach, as Alveric reaches, toward a world whose beauty is inseparable from its inaccessibility.

The first account belongs to the positivist tradition in its most philosophically serious form, which is not the crude dismissal of everything non-empirical as nonsense, but the more considered position associated with thinkers in the line running from Hume through Comte and into the scientific naturalism of the late nineteenth century. On this account, the desire for enchantment is a residue — a survival, in the evolutionary or historical sense, of modes of thought that preceded the development of rational inquiry. The world was once populated with spirits, gods, and magical forces because human beings lacked the conceptual tools to explain natural phenomena otherwise. As those tools developed, the spirits retreated. What remains, in a culture that has largely completed this transition, is not evidence of a genuinely enchanted world but evidence of the psychological difficulty of relinquishing inherited categories. The desire for magic is, on this view, a desire for a kind of cognitive comfort — for a world that responds to human wishes, that is structured around human meanings, that is, in the deepest sense, about us. The positivist diagnosis is not unsympathetic; it acknowledges that the loss of enchantment is experienced as a loss. But it insists that the experience of loss is not evidence that something real has been lost. We mourn the departure of what was never there.

The second account belongs to the Romantic tradition, and it is importantly different from the caricature that positivism tends to argue against. The serious Romantic position — the one articulated with philosophical rigour by Coleridge and developed in different registers by Schopenhauer, by Carlyle, and by the aesthetic theorists of the later nineteenth century — does not simply assert that the enchanted world exists and that rational inquiry fails to reach it. It makes a more careful claim: that there are dimensions of human experience, particularly those involving beauty, moral seriousness, and the sense of the sacred, which cannot be accounted for within a framework that treats reality as exhausted by what is measurable and causally explicable. The desire for enchantment, on this account, is not a residue of primitive thinking but a form of genuine perception — a responsiveness to something real that the analytical intellect, by its very method, is constitutionally unable to register. The Romantic does not deny that science works within its domain; the claim is that its domain is not the whole of what is.

These two positions had been in contest for the better part of a century by the time Dunsany wrote, and neither had decisively prevailed. What Weber's formulation of disenchantment added to the debate was a sociological dimension that neither the positivists nor the Romantics had fully

reckoned with: the process of rationalisation was not merely an intellectual development but a structural transformation of social life, and it was self-reinforcing in ways that made reversal practically inconceivable. Weber did not celebrate this. His tone, in the passages where he addresses it most directly, is one of austere resignation. The enchanted world was gone, and the honest response was to acknowledge the fact without consoling oneself with either religious revival or Romantic aestheticism. This is the intellectual atmosphere into which *The King of Elfland's Daughter* arrives — not as a simple protest against it, but as a work that takes the problem seriously enough to dramatise it from the inside.

What Elfland Actually Is

Dunsany's novel constitutes a philosophical intervention in the debate between positivism and Romanticism by refusing the terms that both traditions share, and by doing so through the formal properties of the narrative itself rather than through explicit argument. Both traditions, despite their opposition, agree on one crucial point: that the relationship between the ordinary world and whatever lies beyond it is fundamentally a relationship of desire and its object. The positivist says the object is illusory; the Romantic says it is real. But both conceive the structure of the situation as one in which a subject reaches toward something, and the question is whether that something is there to be reached. Dunsany's novel dismantles this shared assumption by showing that the enchanted world — Elfland — is not structured as an object of desire at all. It is a domain with its own ontological character, its own temporality, its own indifference to human longing, and the attempt to treat it as something that can be desired, won, and possessed is precisely what destroys the possibility of any genuine relationship with it.

No abstract statement can carry this point; only the narrative can make it. When Alveric crosses into Elfland and wins Lirazel as his bride, he does not thereby gain access to the enchanted world. He removes something from it. Lirazel in the mortal world is Elfland's daughter in exile, and the qualities that made her desirable — her otherworldliness, her indifference to mortal time, her inability to be fully present to ordinary life — are not incidental features that might be overcome with patience and love. They are constitutive of what she is. The desire for enchantment, as Dunsany dramatises it, is a desire for a mode of being that is defined by its non-availability to the desiring subject. To possess it is to have already lost it, because possession is a mortal category and enchantment is not.

Dunsany parts company with the Romantic tradition most decisively at precisely this point. The Romantics, for all their insistence on the reality of the imaginative world, tended to conceive the relationship between the human and the transcendent as one that could, in principle, be sustained — through art, through contemplation, through the cultivation of certain modes of attention. Wordsworth's spots of time, Coleridge's secondary imagination, Keats's negative capability: these are all, in different ways, techniques for maintaining contact with a reality that exceeds ordinary

perception. The assumption is that the contact is possible, even if difficult, and that the difficulty is worth the effort. Dunsany's novel questions this assumption at its root. The contact is not merely difficult; it is structurally self-defeating. Every attempt to bring the enchanted world into the ordinary world diminishes it, because the enchanted world is constituted by its separation from the ordinary. Elfland retreats before the advance of mortal life, and this is not a contingent feature of the story but its central philosophical statement.

The positivist, reading this, might feel vindicated: here is a narrative that shows the futility of the desire for enchantment, that demonstrates through its plot the impossibility of sustaining any genuine relationship with a world beyond the ordinary. But this reading misses what the novel is simultaneously insisting upon, which is that Elfland is real. It is not a projection of Alveric's wishes; it has its own laws, its own king, its own time that runs differently from mortal time. The novel does not treat the enchanted world as a psychological phenomenon. It treats it as a genuine domain whose reality is not diminished by its inaccessibility. The positivist account cannot accommodate this, because on the positivist account, a world that is genuinely inaccessible to rational inquiry and empirical investigation is not a world at all but a word.

What Dunsany is working toward — and what neither the positivist nor the Romantic framework had the resources to articulate — is something closer to a philosophical account of the relationship between the finite and the infinite that takes seriously both the reality of the infinite and the constitutive limitations of the finite. The mortal world and Elfland are not two versions of the same kind of thing, one of which happens to be more beautiful or more rational than the other. They are ontologically distinct in a way that makes any simple reconciliation between them impossible. And yet the novel does not conclude that the two worlds have nothing to do with each other. The question it leaves open is whether the proper relationship between them is one of tragic separation, or whether Dunsany is gesturing toward a third possibility: that the finite can be properly oriented toward the infinite without attempting to possess it, and that this orientation, rather than any achieved union, is what the desire for enchantment is really seeking.

The Limit as Relationship

Whether Dunsany's novel ends in tragedy is the question that its final movements force into the open. The evidence for that reading is not negligible. Alveric spends the better part of his life in a pursuit that unmakes him, wandering a world grown grey at its edges, unable to return to Erl and unable to reach Elfland, a man suspended between two orders of existence and belonging fully to neither. His son Orion grows up with the horn of an elfin mother and the fields of a mortal father pulling at him in opposite directions, and the reader is given no assurance that this division will ever be resolved into something livable. If the novel were to end there, with the boundary between worlds simply reinstated and the human figures left on the wrong side of it, the philosophical conclusion would be clear enough: the desire for enchantment is constitutive of mortal life, and constitutively unsatisfiable, and the most honest thing one can say about it is that it will not stop hurting.

But the novel does not end there. Elfland returns. The boundary dissolves, the fields of Erl are taken into the elfin realm, and Lirazel is restored — not to the mortal world, but to her own. What is philosophically significant about this ending is not that it provides consolation, because it does not, not in any simple sense. The people of Erl who had wanted enchantment and then feared it when it came are now inside it permanently, which is not obviously what they wanted. Alveric, who had wanted Lirazel, does not get her back in the way he wanted her. The ending refuses the grammar of wish-fulfilment. What it offers instead is something more austere and more interesting: a re-establishment of the proper relationship between the two worlds, and the suggestion that this relationship, properly understood, is not the absence of connection but its correct form.

The distinction that needs to be drawn here is between possession and orientation. These are not the same thing, and the novel's entire structure has been engaged in demonstrating that they are not. Possession is the mode of relation that both the positivist and the Romantic, in their different ways, take to be the only serious one. The positivist says: you cannot possess Elfland, therefore Elfland is nothing. The Romantic says: you can possess it, through imagination, through art, through the intensification of feeling that breaks ordinary categories open. Dunsany's novel refuses both positions not by finding a middle path between them but by questioning the premise they share — that possession is the relevant category at all. Elfland, as the novel presents it, is not the kind of thing that can be possessed. This is not a limitation of human capacity that might in principle be overcome; it is a feature of what Elfland is. A world with its own temporality, its own laws, its own indifference to mortal categories, cannot be held without ceasing to be itself. The moment it becomes an object of secure possession it has already become something else — a memory, a story, a ruin.

Orientation is a different mode of relation entirely. To be oriented toward something is not to have it, and not to be in the process of acquiring it, but to be constituted in one's movement and attention by its presence at the horizon. The wanderer in the fields of Erl who looks toward the hills where

Elfland sometimes shows itself is not failing to possess Elfland; he is doing something else, something that has its own integrity and its own form. The boundary between the worlds, on this reading, is not a wall that excludes but a horizon that orients. And a horizon, as anyone who has thought carefully about what horizons are, is not nothing. It is the condition under which a landscape has depth, under which a direction of travel is possible, under which the difference between near and far can be perceived at all. Remove the horizon and you do not gain access to what was beyond it; you lose the structure that made your position in the world intelligible.

Dunsany's ending enacts rather than merely asserts this structure. The return of Elfland is not a reward and not a punishment. It is a restoration of the proper structure of mortal existence, which requires the infinite to be genuinely present — present enough to orient, present enough to pull — without being available for possession. The people of Erl had made the mistake, early in the novel, of thinking that what they wanted was enchantment as a possession, something that could be brought into the village and kept there. The witch-doctor Ziroonderel understands, in her oblique way, that this is not how it works. The parliament of Erl that sends Alveric to bring back an elfin bride is asking for something whose nature they have not understood, and the novel is, among other things, the education in that misunderstanding.

What the Finite Owes to the Infinite

The claim implicit in all of this deserves to be made explicit, because it is the claim that distinguishes Dunsany's position from anything available in the dominant intellectual traditions of his moment: the finite is not simply excluded from the infinite. It is constituted in its finitude by its orientation toward what exceeds it. Not a mystical assertion — a structural one. A mortal life that had no relationship to anything beyond its own categories — no sense of a world that exceeded its measurements, no pull toward what could not be possessed — would not be a life that had simply lost something optional. It would be a different kind of thing altogether, and not obviously a better one.

The positivist tradition, in its most rigorous forms, had been working toward exactly that vision of human life: a life purged of its orientations toward the unverifiable, a life that took its bearings entirely from what could be confirmed by the methods of natural science. What Dunsany's novel suggests, without ever making the argument in propositional form, is that this vision misunderstands what the orientation toward the infinite actually does in a human life. The orientation is not a cognitive error that happens to have emotional consequences. It is a structural feature of the kind of existence that mortal creatures have — the feature that gives their world depth, that makes the difference between the near and the far, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the tame and the wild, perceptible at all. Dispel it, and you do not arrive at a cleaner picture of reality. You arrive at a flattened one.

The Romantic tradition had understood this much, and its insistence on the reality and necessity of the enchanted dimension of experience was not wrong. Where it went wrong, or at least where its more programmatic versions went wrong, was in concluding that the proper response to this orientation was to attempt its satisfaction — to pursue the infinite through art or imagination or feeling until the boundary dissolved and the two worlds merged. Dunsany's novel shows, with a patience and a precision that are easy to underestimate, that this pursuit does not satisfy the desire it is meant to satisfy. It destroys the structure that made the desire meaningful. Elfland retreats before Alveric not because Dunsany is a pessimist but because the retreat is philosophically necessary: a world that could be entered and held would not be the world that the desire was oriented toward.

The third position that the novel works toward — and it works toward it through narrative rather than argument, which is part of what makes it philosophically interesting — is something like this: the proper relationship between the finite and the infinite is one of maintained distinction. Not separation, because separation would mean the infinite had no bearing on the finite, which is precisely what the novel denies. Not union, because union would mean the destruction of both terms. But a relationship in which the boundary between them is kept alive, kept active, kept productive — in which the limit is understood not as a privation but as the condition under which both sides of it can be what they are.

The Novel's Precision Against Its Historical Moment

Claiming too much for this reading in terms of what Dunsany himself consciously intended would be a distortion. He was not a systematic philosopher, and *The King of Elfland's Daughter* is not a philosophical treatise. But intellectual history is not the history of intentions. It is the history of what ideas do when they are given form, and what this novel does — in 1924, in the specific intellectual climate of that moment — is more precise and more consequential than its generic classification as fantasy fiction has generally allowed.

Nineteen twenty-four is a year in which the positivist programme is approaching what will become its most rigorous and most confident phase. The logical empiricists are consolidating their position; the verification principle is being sharpened into a tool for the elimination of metaphysics; the ambition to produce a unified science of everything that can be meaningfully said is not yet chastened by the difficulties that will eventually chasten it. Against this background, a novel that takes the reality of Elfland seriously — not as metaphor, not as psychological projection, not as the expression of a wish — is doing something philosophically pointed, whether or not its author would have described it in those terms.

At the same time, the Romantic tradition in its various late forms is not in good health. The confidence that art or imagination could provide genuine access to a dimension of reality beyond the empirical had been shaken by a war that had made the rhetoric of transcendence seem, to many,

obscene. The enchanted world, in 1924, is not easy to believe in, and the writers who still believe in it are working against a powerful current of disenchantment that is not only philosophical but historical and moral.

Dunsany's novel does not resolve this situation. It does not offer a proof that Elfland exists, or a method for reaching it, or a consolation for those who cannot. What it offers is a reframing of the question — a suggestion that the debate between positivism and Romanticism has been conducted on false terms, that both traditions have been asking what to do about the desire for enchantment when they should have been asking what kind of thing that desire is and what relationship to it is appropriate for creatures of the kind we are. The answer the novel works toward is not comfortable, but it is not despairing either. It is, in the strict sense, a philosophical answer: enchantment is not an illusion to be dispelled, not a world to be entered, but a horizon to be kept — the horizon without which mortal life loses the depth that makes it worth the name.

What the novel anticipates, in this reading, is a set of questions that will become central to European philosophy in the decades following its publication — questions about finitude, about the structure of human existence, about what it means to be the kind of being that is always already oriented toward what exceeds it. It refuses, with equal firmness, the positivist answer that such orientation is a mistake and the Romantic answer that it is a programme. In doing so, it stakes out a position that is genuinely its own: that the limit between the finite and the infinite is not the problem to be solved but the relationship to be sustained, and that sustaining it, without either denying it or trying to cross it, is what it means to live in a world that is, in the only sense that finally matters, enchanted.

The Illusion of Endless Desire: A Philosophical Essay on The King of Elfland's Daughter is an independent scholarly essay by Daniel Shilansky.

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